

# SPEAK EASY

## Mammoth DEFECTIVE



**RAW  
AND  
READ**

POST-MODERN  
MUTTERINGS  
WITH BURNS  
AND SPIEGELMAN

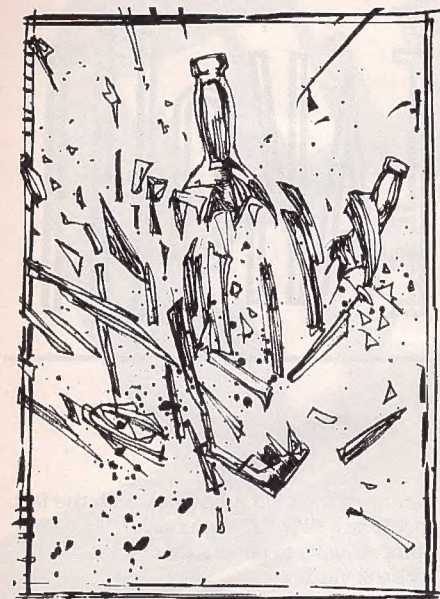
**THE  
SPIRAL  
CAGE**

AL DAVISON'S  
GRAPHIC  
BREAKTHROUGH

**BIG NUMBERS**

MATHEMATICS OF MANKIND





# BIG NUMBERS

## The Mathematics of Mankind

With *Big Numbers*, Alan Moore and Bill Sienkiewicz have taken a major step away from the traditional concerns of mainstream comics, and from the expectations of their readership. Nigel Curson spoke to Sienkiewicz about his hopes for the series.

"What I want to do now is - well, it's a trend you can see in *V* and in *Watchmen* and in *Swamp Thing* and in *Miracleman*, you can see it in all of them, there's a trend towards a gradual fascination with people on street corners. It's very often the ordinary people who come to fascinate me more than the people in the costumes, which must be very obvious to people. It might be seen as an annoying indulgence or terribly boring, but it's what I'm fascinated by, and that is the way my work will probably take me in the future. Not in a Harvey Pekar, Eddie Campbell sense - much as I love those people's work I don't think I could do that, I don't think my life is interesting enough to do that with." Thus spake Alan Moore on the occasion of completing *V for Vendetta* and beginning work on *The Mandelbrot Set*, the mammoth work



that was to become **Big Numbers**. No writer has come to symbolize the dilemmas and the opportunities facing comics creators so much as Moore. His masterly reshaping of the substance of superhero mythology have set the agenda for any writer working even half-seriously in the field - where the eighties were awash with pallid revampings of the Kirby Kosmos, it seems the nineties may well have an equal abundance of Moore-inspired protagonists, treading existential pathways between Marvel heroism and "new realism".

Having staked out the territory, Moore no longer seems interested in exploring it, and indeed seems intent on reinventing his career as he once reinvented characters, detaching himself first from the publishing mainstream, then from the fans, and finally from the comics press. The existence of Mad Love enables him to present his work as and when he pleases, and in a form of his choosing, free of the editorial interference he began to find so galling at DC, and without having to play the publishing game. As well as absenting himself from the British convention scene (which it could certainly be argued had begun to make intolerable demands of him), Moore also now refuses to give interviews to the comics press - a forthcoming magnum opus for **The Comics Journal** honours his last obligation in this respect.

All of this is understandable in view of Moore's desire to devote more time to the work, and to explore subject areas which contemporary comic books have shown little interest in. But equally it's an economic decision: his status as

possibly the only "bankable" comics writer of his generation enables him to take a step that many other creators would envy. He no longer has to work in the mainstream, and his and Bill Sienkiewicz's reputations guarantee **Big Numbers** the degree of fan interest it requires to succeed. As Moore's superhero work created the climate in which **Watchmen** could succeed, he now hopes that **Watchmen** and **V**, in turn, have prepared readers for the preoccupations of **Big Numbers**, although he is aware of the dangers: "... the major-

**Being realistic, it probably means that a lot of the interest that the comics industry has shown me over the last few years will be on the wane, which I'm quite relieved about.**

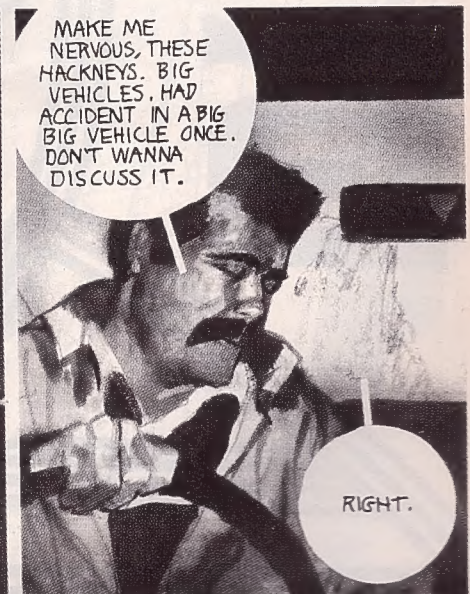
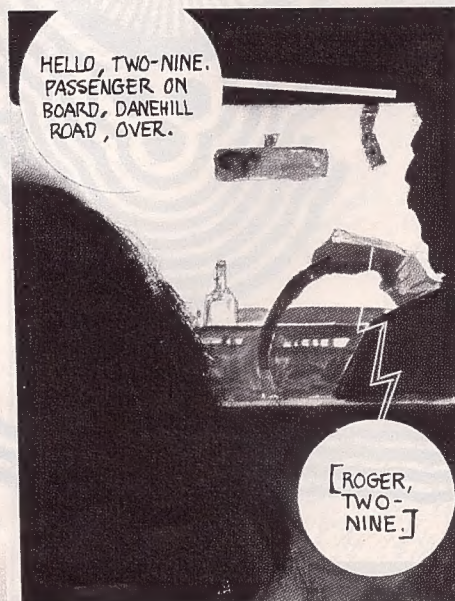
ity of those Alan Moore fans out there are, in fact, Alan Moore superhero fans, and I'll be pleasantly surprised if it turns out to be otherwise, but being realistic it probably means that a lot of the interest that the comics industry has shown me over the last couple of years will be on the wane, which I'm quite relieved about.

"I feel I need a louder and clearer voice, and I think that one thing which would make it clearer is to tear away from the tissues of fantasy and mystery and imagination that I tend to plant my work in. I don't want to do dull comics, I want to show how fabulous and weird and exciting the

real world is without distortion, without giving anyone psionic powers and mutant abilities."

The resulting work, judging from the first issue, may well be triumphant - a pared-down distillation of Moore's familiar techniques of timing and juxtaposition of incidents, strengthened by his ever-improving ear for dialogue. His traditional expositional narrative has been replaced by Bill Sienkiewicz's powerful storytelling and gift for rendering facial expressions. The story - concerning the construction of an American-type shopping mall in the British Midlands, and the effect on the established community - reorganizes the experience of ordinary people into "heightened realism", to impressive effect.

Sienkiewicz has turned in an art job that is both powerful and totally accessible, and pronounces himself well pleased with the result. "It's about people, and about humanity, and as much as the plot development comes into play, you know, with the mathematics, it's actually the mathematics of humanity, and so there's that element that ties it all together. I mean it's a metaphor for the order and chaos of humanity, as well as what it is in and of itself. But I think that what we really want to get across is that, aside from the fact that we want to do something entertaining and informative - it's historical, it's a sexual book, there's elements of a thriller - the reader is really the omnipotent one, because he gets to view everyone, and so certain characters are interacting, and it may amount to a situation where the reader may find him or herself saying 'don't go in the door'. It's that kind of





thing coupled with the entertainment and informative quality, but at the same time doing something that defies genre and breaks away.

"I suppose in some ways, it's much more classic in its approach. Alan and I were just talking about the fact that it's much more reminiscent of something like *Gasoline Alley* or *Krazy Kat* than anything in the superhero genre at all. In that respect, I suppose it's going back to the basics of the medium, with the new math of the future, and coupled with things that have been done recently in terms of things like *Watchmen* and *Elektra* and other books like that. It's more subversive, I suppose, it's destroying from within, you know, by wearing a suit and tie, destroying the establishment from within. But that's not really our intention, our intention is to do something that's really accessible to everyone. Alan was telling me that he was showing it to his mother and some of her friends, and people who are not familiar with the vernacular or the mechanics of reading current comics, and they found that they really enjoyed it, and Alan said they laughed in all the right places, and had the response to warrant it feeling like it's something that is not going to be just simply a book for the comic readers, the people who know the language and the vocabulary, but for a bigger, wider audience, not specifically for comics, but for comics as a valid medium, separate and apart from what we in the field, readers and professionals, know it as."

While acknowledging that subject matter in comics is opening up,

Sienkiewicz is impatient with many of the ways in which the new creative freedom has been under-used. "That's what happens in a lot of cases with those adult themes - a lot of times adult means you can show tits and swear more, you know, use 4-letter words, and occasionally an 11-letter word. The problem with that is that it's sort of a juvenile viewpoint of what adult is, and there's only so many times you can scream, and so long you can sustain a riot, and so what we're doing is actually approaching it with a very steady, slow pace, so that at the moment of the scream it can shake

**A lot of times adult means you can show tits and swear more, you know**

you to your bootstraps. And I lot of times I think that the people who grew up reading the comics, who eventually ended up doing them, they keep being disillusioned, because the companies by and large - it's a grist mill, you know, producing the work. It's just this voracious furnace that you keep stoking and stoking and stoking, and you can run out of coal. So the frustration I think that comes up with that is that the creators, the people who work on it, who do the 'adult' stuff, a lot of times it comes across as this sort of whiney, defeatist or, you know, fascist, kind of approach.

"What we're trying for is something a little more universal than simply 'let's rearrange a universe or two' and plug in the machine, the old warhorse for another go-round. And what happens is the maggots have long since bloated the thing, and you're still trying to find pieces of fur and lint to sort of fashion a story out of. What you end up with is this empty vessel that really ... I mean, comics have kind of been looked upon as that child medium, and in a real perjorative, denigrating fashion, and I actually think with all due reason. It's not as if anything's been produced in the last twenty, thirty years ... I can't speak entirely in blanket statements, but let's say the current stuff is in no way, shape or form anything that could be revered to the extent that it is. But the medium ... my God, the medium itself is just ... there ain't nothing like it, it's so wonderful. I hate to think that all the brilliant stuff was done by guys like Herriman. I'd like to see something like that stuff happen now, or in the future. That, I think, would be a real Golden Age, a real heyday. It's interesting with the Turtles ... you know, that started out as a spoof and then caught on, and now I think it's almost as if the comic is sort of, you know, just another piece of merchandising in this vast machine, and it never started out that way."

While *Big Numbers* is extremely tightly plotted, and also boasts strong character development, Sienkiewicz also brings an illustrative approach which is both innovative and at the same time precise and





planned. As with *Watchmen*, the book is based on a panel grid - in this case 12 to *Watchmen*'s 9, tying in with the LP-shaped page of the book. The mathematical approach, the use of maps, timetables, phone books, the visual reference to physicist turned mad SF writer Rudy Rucker, the gradual change through the course of the series from monochrome to full painted colour, all of this visual structure is strongly linked to the story structure. "(The artistic approach) ties in with the mathematical approach very definitely, and it ties in with the revelatory nature of the series, and in terms of relevance and relativity, and the actual fact that you can revel in the whole idea of this new science and this new math that has been around forever, but only since the advent of computers has man been able to actually visualise the actual science and order in chaos. So in that respect, it's much more natural. Hence it brightens up and adds colour to the grey, dreary lives of, perhaps, more than quiet desperation at times. The colour definitely does play into that. As far as other techniques, it's in some respects the usual techniques I use, except that I imagine there'll also be computer images, although I'm sorry to say that I won't be involved with those. It does tie in, except that it's much more toned down than something like *Stray Toasters*, because again I think there's the element of communication, and the way to communicate is to tell the story, and what a novel damn idea!"

One thing the reader is immediately struck by is the feeling that the English landscape is being mediated through Sienkiewicz's American perceptions of "Englishness": "People are people. You may think the British and the Americans speak the same language or they don't, but there are also times when there's an element of universality. Also I'm not a stranger to England. I suppose I've seen enough of it to understand some of it, but I also feel that I bring, maybe, an American romance or viewpoint of it. The reaction's been very strong that it feels like England. I, as an American, sail along the Thames or go to the Cotswolds, and there's a certain soft focus and feeling to all that kind of Sherwood Forest and Nottingham ... you know, the whole ideology associated with 'Merrie Old ...', and sort of bringing that and giving it a more contemporary feel. I hope that I won't be doing any great disservice, I'm trying to be

as true as I can. In some respects it's not as difficult, in other respects it's like, you know, I can't just dash downstairs and get a shot of a British cab. Although a friend of mine has a Morris Minor, so you may end up seeing a lot of people in there driving Morris Minors (laughs)."

The authenticity of the visual landscape is strengthened by the wealth of visual reference material used. "Absolutely, there's no way to fake this stuff. I mean, I could have gone, say, more in the Eddie Campbell vein, like he's doing in *From Hell*, but I really didn't want to go that route, I wanted to try something that had a real verisimilitude to it in terms of people looking, not so much as cartoons, although there will be cartoony elements, but when they are in there it's for a specific purpose. There's extensive photo-reference.

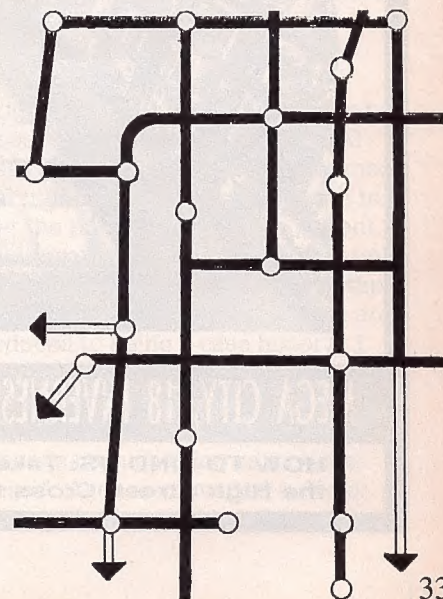
**Maybe I'm still idealistic after all these years to think that the passion and belief in the integrity of the medium could still hold out.**

I've also recruited - currently they're friends, at the end of this I don't know - about 40 people to model for the characters. That's been interesting in itself, dealing with so many people. They're all really into it, some more than others. Some are a little sceptical and some have become completely identified with it. They want to know what happens to their character, they want to know about the story. One of them is an actor, who's done work in film and on stage, and he feels like it's one of the best roles he's ever had. Talk about a sense of community!"

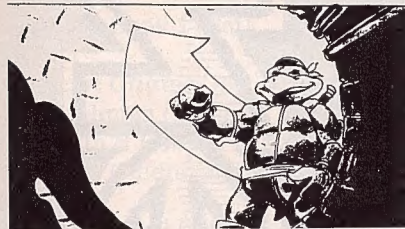
Alan Moore is well-known for the incredible detail in his scripts, a factor Sienkiewicz regards as liberating rather than restricting: "That's still there, but Alan and I pretty much set out from the beginning that he was gonna write that way, and I could take what I thought would work, and otherwise try something else. With Alan, his sensibilities are, I'd say, damn near impeccable, and so I find I'm making very few changes, and what I'm doing is just picking up areas that I want to really express the nuances of and intensify, and bring the words and the way we do see the characters, to life. By and

large we're working very much close to the script. I actually think what's happening is that now we've done the first issue, I think that images that I'm doing will reflect later on as Alan sees it, he'll be playing on certain things that I've done. I imagine I'll look back in retrospect at the first issue ... I mean, I see things that I would have done differently now, but I imagine by then, with all the characters fleshed out, the sense of getting to know all the characters, who they are, will be more thoroughly worked out."

The artistic importance of Big Numbers will become clearer as the series progresses, but it will also be interesting to see the effects on the industry of two such major creators moving into the area of self-publishing. "I think the independents are the real source of fire, real fire and passion. They're hungry, and there's a difference between being hungry and being gluttonous and greedy. Maybe I'm still idealistic after all these years to think that the passion and belief in the integrity of the medium could still hold out. I certainly feel it can, and that's probably why I won't be doing anything for DC. There are so many options and things opening up, that there is more of a chance for really distinctive, personal visions to come to the fore, which is why I'm really ecstatic about books like *Eightball* or *Yummy Fur*, and of course *Love & Rockets*, which has sort of been a staple of integrity and promise. I think that sensibility is starting to percolate down." As Moore and Sienkiewicz's sensibilities and preoccupations move further away from super-deeds and flights of fancy, we will be waiting to see if their audience can make the same leap of imagination. If so, the world of mainstream comics may be changed forever. ■







**G** Brendan McCarthy beamed down from the Planet Luxy for a brief visit to tell us about his extra curricular activities in the glamorous and well-paid world of film and television. Yes triv kids, it was psychedelic wunderkind McCarthy who did the storyboards for the forthcoming *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* movie. McCarthy also helped design the Turtles subway lair with Tony Riot and the villain Shredders' hideout. So, at least some of it should look good, eh fans?

This is just one of a host of projects McCarthy became involved in after designing the Emmy award-winning episode of *The Storyteller* for director Steve Baron and his company Limelight Productions - who coincidentally have also optioned Milligan/McCarthy's *Freakwave* for a possible movie. McCarthy is also credited as Production Designer on a futureworld, sci-fi courtroom television drama, *Justice 2,500* - which he describes as a cross between *Perry Mason* and *Judge Dredd* - and on *Highlander II*, both of which should hit our screens sometime this year. Which is not to mention *The Strange Voyage of Captain Cracking*, a surreal comics history by Milligan/McCarthy which featured a decapitated Brian Bolland, cancelled at the last minute by youf kulcher TV prog Club X after their budget ran out. Anyone out their with a spare hundred grand?

**G** GRAFFITI GIVEAWAY  
Yes folks, it's freebie time at Graffiti Central. Those generous people at *Deadline* and *Fatman Press* are giving away T-shirts to the first five people to wave a copy of *Speakeasy* in front of their stands at this month's Glasgow Comic Art Convention. That's right, all you have to do to claim these sought after, hi-fashion items is to go up to the *Deadline* and *Fat Man Press* stands, clutching a copy of *Speakeasy* in your sweaty hands, and utter the immortal words: "*Speakeasy* is the world's greatest comzine". But we're not content with that, oh no! The lucky ten will also receive a free ticket to what is definitely going to be the social event of the weekend; the *Speakeasy / Deadline / Fat Man* party taking place on the Saturday night at the Renfrew Ferry, Clyde Place from 7.30pm. At eight o'clock we'll be announcing the winners of the first *Speakeasy* Reader's Poll Awards, to be presented by Chris Donald and the rest of the *Viz* editorial team, before moving on with a Tank Girl lookalike competition, a host of live acts, and lots and lots of drinking. But never fear, if others get there first you will still be able to buy a ticket from *Deadline*, *Fat Man*, or from *AKA Comics* for a very reasonable £3. And for those of you who can't make it to Glasgow we will give away the new *Speakeasy* T-shirt to the first five of you who simply write in and ask for one. Rave on!

## PRECINCT

**AKA BOOKS AND COMICS**  
33 Virginia Street, Glasgow G1  
041 552 8731

**Owners:** John McShane, Stephen Montgomery, Peter Root.

**Location:** Interesting position in the Virginia Galleries, an old tobacco auction market now full of various shop units and situated in the very trendy Merchant City area of the centre of Glasgow, just off the main shopping area of Argyle Street. An indie record store and second hand bookshop specialising in science fiction, horror and crime are situated right beside Aka as an added attraction.

**Layout:** Two rooms, the first with new comics, 7000 back issues from Marvel and DC, and the usual range of graphic novels and trade paperbacks. All comics regardless of company are alphabetically arranged in shelves down one wall. Central table with special offers, displays, just-ins etc. Latest issues of best selling monthlies also displayed separately. *Bogie Man* posters etc on prominent display. The second, much smaller room has science fiction books, indie back issues and original artwork for sale.

**Range:** Comprehensive Marvel and DC, most indies - Northstar, Eternity, Gladstone, Fantagraphics, Knockabout, *Fat Man* (surprisingly enough), and more. Also badges, T-shirts, models etc.

**European:** A few foreign-language, some Catalan. Not at all what you would expect in the 1990 European City of Culture blah blah blah, is it?

**Best Sellers:** *Bogie Man* (are you starting to notice a pattern yet?), *Legends of DK*, *Viz*, *Electric Soup* (a sort of Scottish *Viz*), *Predator*, *Ninja Turtles*. *Batman* cooling, *X-Men* on the simmer.

**Prices:** Nothing to complain about, priced to sell, they say.

**Delivery Days:** Regularly on Tuesday-Saturday.

**Will they order comics on request?:** Yes, 500+ standing orders.

**Signings:** Regular events. Management have good contacts with loads of people.

**Staff:** Owners have organised comic marts, signings and conventions in Glasgow for the last twelve years. Regular staff are pleasant and approachable. That fashionable young man behind the counter wrapping your *Fantastic Four* may well be the artist on *Trident's* hot new release and the talkative little man on the phone is the editor of *The Bogie Man*. Come to think of it you'll probably be the only person in the shop, staff or otherwise, who isn't in the comics biz.

**Clientele:** Cultured European suburbanites, or so I was told. This is the place where Pat Kane bought his copy of *Arkham Asylum*, if that is anything to go by. Less kids than usual with a lot of refugees from the music store next door. Often some comics hack or other in to pay his respects to John McShane.

**Comment:** Probably the best, and certainly the friendliest comic shop in Scotland. There's a cafe in the basement of the Galleries where you can browse through your purchases and possibly overhear various Glasgow comixbrats plotting away, little suspecting that the *Speakeasy* mole heard every word.

Gordon Rennie



Photo: John McShane